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Mainstream movies over the Internet a slow work in progress

By [James Turner](#)

Almost from the first days of the Internet, one of the products promised as "just around the corner" has been video-on-demand.

That promise has been made for nearly a decade now. And except for a few limited pilot programs, the idea of watching any movie or other video release on your computer whenever you want to is still just a promise.

But as high-speed Internet connections become more ubiquitous, a close cousin of video-on-demand has emerged. While you still can't click a button and watch a movie instantly, the first service offering downloads of recently released mainstream films is now available.

Movielink (www.movielink.com) offers a moderate selection of studio releases that can be downloaded over a cable modem or DSL line in one to two hours.

Once on your PC's hard drive, you have up to a month to watch the film. But after viewing it for the first time, you have 24 hours to watch it again before the film expires.

The movies are encrypted to prevent viewers from copying them onto recordable DVDs.

Rental fees range from \$4.95 for newly released films such as "Scooby-Doo" to \$1.99 for a classic like the Jane Fonda camp romp, "Barbarella."

As for the software needed to watch a film, you can use either Windows Media Player, or RealPlayer from Real Networks. Both formats appear to work equally well.

But Movielink has some drawbacks.

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For one, owners of Apple computers or other machines without Windows can't use the service; they are incompatible.

For those who do own Windows, you still need to start downloading your movie several hours before you can watch it. And, let's face it, curling up in front of your computer to see a movie just isn't as much fun as watching it on a large-screen TV.

As for video quality, it's about as good as a VHS videotape.

But you may occasionally see what video gurus call "artifacts of the compression process." During scenes with a lot of motion the video becomes choppy and staggers. (The rest of us call this funny-looking video.)

Finally, all the films viewed during evaluation were formatted to fit a computer screen. They are not in the wide-screen "letterbox" format available on most DVDs.

Movielink movies also did not come with commentaries or other special features usually found on DVDs.

For those not interested in mainstream films, several other Internet services offer movies for specialized audiences. For example, AtomFilms (www.atomfilms.com) focuses on short films (they currently have a new set of "Wallace and Gromit" animated shorts available), while MovieFlix (www.movieflix.com) has a good selection of B-Movies and Foreign films ("Bride of the Gorilla" anyone?)

• *James Turner is a computer consultant and an avid Web surfer living in New Hampshire.*

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